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FOR GIVING

Six Little Plays

FOR

Illinois Children

By

WALLACE RICE

Pageant Writer, Illinois Centennial
Commission.

Published by the
Illinois Centennial Commission

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SUGGESTIONS FOR GIVING SIX LITTLE PLAYS FOR ILLINOIS CHILDREN.

THE PROBLEM. The dialogue and certain stage directions are given in separate volumes of the "Six Little Plays for Illinois Children." These booklets do not constitute the plays. They are mere directions for giving the plays, the dialogue telling what to say, the stage directions telling what to do, in exactly the same sense in which a piece of paper with words and notes of music does not constitute a song, but merely the words to be sung and the notes to sing them on. Much more than the booklets contain will have to be worked out: Where the characters are to stand or sit when speaking, how they are to reach such positions, how they are to be grouped upon occasion, the manner in which given lines are to be spoken or sung for their best interpretation, how the stage is to be arranged under local circumstances with the needs of presentation in mind, how it is to be lighted when lights are needed, how all these results are to be best obtained, how the characters are to be dressed, what articles (the properties) are needed and how they shall be cared for, and much more. Let it be said that all this sounds much more difficult than it will be found to be.

MANAGEMENT. The preliminary organization should be made with reference to the selection of a stage manager, an assistant stage manager, a

wardrobe mistress and an assistant, a property man and an assistant, a prompter and an assistant prompter, and a person in charge of the lights with an assistant.

CAST. There are eight speaking parts, four boys and four girls, in each play, and eight more persons, four boys and four girls, can be utilized, who have no speaking parts. But the other eight should each understudy one of the speaking parts, to guard against accident. If the school stage is large, or the plays are to be given in ample spaces out-of-doors, as many more children without speaking parts as can be made dramatically effective can be placed on the stage. By dramatically effective is meant as many as can be kept fluid and natural under the circumstances to assist in the effect desired. This depends largely upon stage management—the better the management, the larger the number permissible.

PROLOGUES. While the prologues may be omitted, if given they can be spoken by as many different children as there are prologues, six in all, or one child can do them all, or three children may each do two, or two children may each do three. The lines are more insistently rhythmical than would be the case with older persons reciting them. Good clear voices are required, considerable vivacity, and it must be kept in mind that they are not written in prose, but in blank verse, with a slight pause at the end of each line to mark the fact. The Prologue may be dressed as a herald, in tabard and fleshings, and accompanied by trumpeters to blow the blast signifying the opening of the play, or as an Indian chief accompanied by tom-toms, as a woodland sprite

or fairy with attendants or without, or as Illinois personified in any suitable manner, or in costumes appropriate to the play ensuing.

SCENE. A single scene answers for all of the plays. There is an entrance to the left (of the audience) nearest the footlights indoors or the line of the stage outdoors. Another entrance is to the right of the center of the stage stretching off diagonally to the right, but showing something of a vista. If it can slope upward away from the stage it will be better. Left of the center at the back of the stage is the entrance to a cave, in front of which should be bushes fixed firmly enough to be parted and to spring back after being crawled through. Probably a slit in the back-drop will answer indoors, while outdoors earth may be piled around a barrel, which can be crawled through. There should be a way out on the other side, but care should be taken to keep any light showing through from the back. In Play V the site of the cave is occupied by the front of a little red school-house, which may be placed cornering to obviate the need for sides indoors; outdoors a portable school-house can be supplied in some cases by the school authorities. It must have a practicable door. In Play VI a pile of real bricks, stones, and bits of wood which can be cleared away is set on top of the cave entrance. Behind a curtain this can be arranged; outdoors where no curtain can be used there can be a grouping of the procession in front while this is effected, or it can be done openly. American audiences are accustomed to putting up with a great deal.

COSTUMES. Play I calls for cotton khaki cloth to simulate buckskin, with short leggings and short hunting shirt, both fringed at the seams, for the boys, and longer leggings and shirts for the girls. The children are barefooted, but moccasins can be worn. Wigs of straight black hair, loose for the boys, braided for the girls, will add. Children naturally dark of eyes and hair can be used in this scene to advantage. The skin, wherever exposed, must be darkened and reddened with grease paint.

Play II requires simple clothing, white for the girls, with jumpers and breeches for the boys, who may wear dark blue kerchiefs over their heads. The children may all be barefooted, and shoes, if worn, should be rather coarse and clumsy.

Play III should see the boys in linsey-woolsey shirts, or common "hickory" ones, with longish trousers, and the girls in one-piece frocks longer than are now worn. Hank and Hannah are rather more carefully dressed, and have shoes and long stockings on at first; the others are barefooted.

Play IV calls for simple dressing, the boys in overalls that have seen service, the girls in white or in colored calicos with sunbonnets, the boys wearing wide-brimmed straw hats except Ned, who has a cap. Harry is booted and carries a riding-whip, his clothing being more expensive than that of the others. Billee is ragged and, of course, black wherever his skin shows; all but Harry are barefooted. Harry's companions are dressed much like the French boys in II.

Play V is in February, and clothing of the Civil War period is worn. All are shod, of course, but

care is to be taken to have the clothing look old-fashioned.

Play VI is for Boy Scouts and Campfire Girls, except Walter and Mary, who are in the dress of today.

WARDROBE MISTRESS. A girl with the needed assistants should be chosen as Wardrobe Mistress, who shall see that the necessary costumes are on hand when required, shall take charge of them during rehearsals and be generally responsible for them. She should also have charge of the paints, cosmetics, and the like for the make-ups, and assist in this at dress rehearsals and performances.

PROPERTIES. Play I needs bows and arrows, war clubs and axes, which are made of stone and wood, without metal. These can be made with a little teaching. Colored grease paints in sticks for the boys to line on their faces for the war dance are required. If rude drums are provided, for the girls to beat while the boys dance, the savage effect will be heightened. A small yellow dog—a small dog in any event, not a puppy—should be on hand, and should be in rehearsals, to ensure good behavior at the performance.

Play II needs only a pure white flag on a staff and an old-fashioned drum with a long barrel.

Play III requires bows and arrows, which may be of modern type, long pointed sticks with their points hardened in the fire and showing black, short heavy clubs of wood with the bark on, a small rifle with bullet pouch and powder horn for Ted—a modern rifle will probably have to answer for the old flint-lock.

Play IV demands a short heavy log of wood and a lunch-basket with edible sandwiches—real food.

Play V needs an American Flag (the Flag of the period had thirty-four stars), two pieces of writing paper, an old-fashioned newspaper, and two doughnuts and an apple for Wallie.

Play VI calls for stone or wood tipped arrows without feathers, three large copper coins, a Lincoln cent, an electric torch, and a pocket magnifying glass.

PROPERTY MAN. All these properties should be in the hands of one of the children and his assistant, who should be responsible for them on all occasions and attend rehearsals in order to become absolutely familiar with their use.

LIGHT MAN. If artificial lights are required, a Light Man should be selected who will know from practice exactly when the lights are to be turned on and off, and what switches are to be used. He should have an assistant, perhaps two, if a curtain is used, to raise and lower the curtain. Where a "quick curtain" is called for, frequent rehearsals should enable him to use speed.

SPEECH. The dialogue is written for the speech of children in the playground rather than in the school-room. Large concessions have been made to correctness of grammar and elimination of expletives and slang, as well as usual corruptions—a better speech than children generally use. Beyond that the children can be relied upon, probably, to speak as children do colloquially—trippingly. The speeches are notably short and should be crisp, the effect of spontaneity being sought always. Any tendency to

drag must be frowned upon. If the children are left to themselves in reason, they will know by ready comparison whether the scene is going right—as it would with them naturally. In Play III Hank and Hannah do not speak with more painstaking than the other children, but with more regard for the dictionary pronunciations, using the Italian “a” where it is there demanded, and reducing final “r” to a vocal murmur.

REHEARSALS. The very brevity and crispness of the dialogue demand frequent rehearsals to secure instant attention to all cues and the spontaneity necessary. The action must be suited to the word and all action plainly worked out at the outset. Each of the eight principals and the eight understudies should have the book of the play, and at the first rehearsal these should have been given them in time to have the actors letter perfect, with their own parts and the cues for them securely in memory. It should be felt that it is an honor to assist in celebrating the centennial anniversary of Illinois, and lack of interest should be followed by dismissal from the cast. The Stage Manager should be the dictator and absolute obedience required. Upon his ingenuity in working out the action will depend the number of children to be used beyond the normal number of sixteen, and he must take pains to see that chances are given the understudies to take the places of their respective principals, to obviate accident and illness. There must be no standing around on the stage, and nobody allowed on it who has not business there. Rehearsals should be given at short

intervals between, and there should be at least two full dress rehearsals.

PROMPTERS. There should be a Prompter and an assistant, both with capacity for learning the entire text of the play. They should be at every rehearsal, stationed off stage left, ready to assist in every way in jogging balky and defective memories, whether for words or action. The moments when such service is needed will develop in rehearsals, and preparation made to meet them on the instant.

GROWN PEOPLE. Parents and kinsfolk of the children should not be allowed at rehearsals, and grown people in general should not be allowed to make their presence in any way manifest. Children of the age required are, in general, much better actors than their elders, and can be quite without self-consciousness. In some scenes, like the war dance in Play I and the opening of Play V, they should be encouraged to let themselves go, and there should be at no time any suppression of enthusiasms, as long as they do not degenerate into mere buffoonery. A short lecture on the period of each play will help. While some elder person may attend all the rehearsals, it should be preferably one with stage experience and the determination not to suggest or interfere, even upon request from the children, except when the need is great. It will be better to let the children do it as they feel it should be done, even when an elder person can see a better way. The use of mere intelligence and reasoning powers is often fatal to the feeling required to render the part. The child's natural behavior, not what an elder thinks it ought to be but what the child feels it is, is the standard.

Nothing should be done to make the child self-conscious or lead him to show off.

ELASTICITY. The plays may be given one at a time on six occasions, two at a time on three occasions, three at a time on two occasions, or all six on one occasion. There will be sixteen parts, and these may be expanded to twenty or forty in each play. The same children may act in all six, there may be complete casts for each of the six, or any stage between. Probably, if there are children enough, separate casts for each, preventing the assembly of many children at any one time, will answer best. It will be seen that, including the executives, stage managers and so forth, the six plays may be rendered by about twenty children, or two hundred and fifty may be utilized.

PROCESSIONS. If processions are decided upon, as indicated below, the prologues should precede them in all cases, following close upon the fall of each curtain respectively. The prologue spoken, the speaker withdraws and the head of the procession should instantly appear at the left of the stage and progress slowly to the right. This may be done in front of the curtain indoors. Outdoors, pains should be taken to provide an exit, right, which will keep those in the procession from turning their backs on the audience as they leave the scene. As soon as the procession has filed from view, the play should begin.

Play I. Indian chiefs in feathered bonnets. Medicine men with peace pipes. Braves with weapons. Squaws with babies in pappoose cases (large dolls with their hair covered will suffice). Little

children, and, possibly, large led dogs with travises hauling burdens. They will pass in Indian file.

Play II. French boys in cassocks and cottas. A boy bearing a rude cross made of two sticks tied in place with strips of bark. A boy with a long robe of black and a wide-brimmed hat to look like a missionary. Woodrangers with packs of furs. An escort of French soldiers in three-cornered hats, white uniforms with cross belts, and white leggings to the knee, bearing the pure white banner of the Bourbon Kings, to be followed at a brief interval by British soldiers in the uniform of revolutionary times, bearing the British Union Jack of that day, which shows only the Crosses of St. George and St. Andrew. Drums can be used and appropriate national music played off stage. French girls in long capes may follow the Cross.

Play III. Boys as frontiersmen, with coonskin caps, fringed hunting shirts and leggings, bearing the flag with thirteen stars in a circle. Girls with long skirts of calico and sunbonnets bearing old-fashioned spinning wheels, dasher churns, pots and cooking utensils, and the like. More boys in wide-brimmed straw hats with sickles and axes, bare-footed, followed by soldiers of the War of 1812, bearing the flag with fifteen stripes and fifteen stars arranged in quincunx, five rows of three each.

Play IV. Blackhawk and braves of the Sacs and Foxes. Soldiers of 1836 with the flag of twenty-one stars and thirteen stripes. Pioneers with rifles and axes. Coal miners with picks. School-teachers with bundles of switches, spectacled and severe—all men. College banners and colors of Illinois College, Jack-

sonville; McKendree College, Lebanon; Shurtleff College, Upper Alton, and Knox College, Galesburg.

Play V. Boys with railroad lanterns and other railway apparatus. Boys in blue with the flag of thirty-four stars, Zouaves, girls as nurses. Women school-teachers. College banners and colors of Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington; Chaddock College, Quincy; Lombard University, Salisbury; Northwestern University, Evanston; Lake Forest College, Monmouth College, the old University of Chicago, Eureka College, St. Ignatius College, Chicago, Northern Illinois College, Fulton, and Northwestern College, Naperville.

Play VI. Boy Scouts and Campfire Girls with soldiers in khaki and sailors in white or blue. Girls as nurses with the Red Cross Flag. Color guard for the Flag with forty-eight stars. Food Conservation boys and girls. Liberty Bond boys and girls.

Final procession. Boys and girls in appropriate costume bearing the colors of the Allies. Belgium. Serbia. Montenegro. France. The British Jack, with England (a red cross on a white ground), Scotland (a white X-cross on a blue ground), Ireland (a golden harp on a blue ground), Canada, Australia, South Africa, India, New Zealand, and Newfoundland. Japan. Italy. Portugal (red and green). Rumania. China. Brazil. Panama. Cuba. Siam. At last Columbia with the Stars and Stripes and Illinois with the Centennial Banner. National airs may be played.

These processions may, of course, be omitted, or may be given at another time as one. A few children, perhaps twenty, will give the effect of the first

six, and the seventh may be omitted as too elaborate, or worked out on a separate feature. The number of children will be somewhat strictly limited indoors, but larger numbers may be used out-of-doors. Much stage management will be required to handle larger numbers. A separate pageant-master with aides will bring results.

CONCLUSION. The plays will act in between twelve and fifteen minutes. The prologues take less than two minutes each. The processions should not average more than ten minutes each as a maximum. If all are given together, it will provide a full afternoon or evening entertainment of about two hours and a half, constituting an elaborate children's pageant.

Let it be finally said that these are suggestions, not prescriptions. If local scenes can be dramatized and added, so much the better. Topics in local history which do not yield dramatic results may be symbolized or indicated in processions. If the children themselves have ideas, by all means let them be worked out sympathetically: an ounce of original effort of this sort is worth a pound of anything dictated from outside. If a child or group of children has such an idea, it may lack the experience needed for its working out dramatically, in which case it may be given form by some one older and more experienced in such expression.

And do keep constantly in mind that these are children's plays, written for childish interpretation and written in the spirit of play and not of instruction.





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